

The Sound of Phonetics

By Anabel A. Cunado

When a Spanish student of English hears the word phonetics, s/he usually panics, mainly because of the English system of twelve vowels (nearly unbelievable for someone with a basic system of five), but also because of the scarcity of pronunciation rules (cf. French or German). In Spain phonetics is taught at the university level, and as part of the curriculum of the Official Schools of Language. In the latter, students over 14 can enroll in a five-year course to learn the language they choose. Their reasons for joining us are varied, but their motivation is usually high. As a teacher in one of those schools, I will try to make a brief summary of the basic problems students of phonetics face, and I will also propose possible solutions.

From Beginner to Intermediate: Shocked but Motivated

Once students have come to accept that there are other “systems” in languages and have overcome their fear of making fools of themselves, the learning process goes smoothly. At this basic level, they are encouraged to pronounce each phoneme with the help of imitation, technical explanations, or repetitive drills (useful books are Tree or Three [1990], Sheep or Ship [1992] or Sounds English [1993]). Though still at a loss with the completely new phonemes, students soon appreciate that they sound “more English” when pronouncing the diphthong /ow/ in “don’t,” “go,” “home” or /@/ in “the.” for instance (the list is endless). More important, they feel that their ability to communicate is greatly improved since they can understand that “give me a pan,” “give me a pun,” “give me a pen,” “give me a pin” have different meanings according to the vowel they pronounce. Or why “excuse me”-“squeeze me;” “vowel”-“bowel”; “kindness”-“kidneys” are mistakes that make people laugh.

Intermediate—Upper Intermediate: From Disillusionment to Frustration

At this stage (from third year on) students are taught to transcribe connected speech. They still have great problems in understanding a non-graded conversation, and they insist that it is mainly because English speakers do not pronounce many of the “sounds” that they expect to hear. This is due, among other reasons, to weak forms and schwas, which are not used in the same way in Spanish. Although they are encouraged to learn and imitate the production of “weak forms,” students do not hear them when they listen to English and do not seem to give them great importance.

From my personal experience in teaching phonetics, this “lack of interest” is due to the fact that applied phonetics is a neglected aspect in ELT. The only practice students get comes from the transcription of written text. Phonetics is soon regarded as something unreal, something that does not go beyond the printed page.

Most books give weak forms short shrift particularly in recorded materials: Gimson 1980 and Parkinson de Saz 1988; O'Connor (1989); Arnold and Gimson 1973; Gimson (1987); Hewings (1993). Although these books contain excellent material for transcriptions, the material is out of context, and therefore difficult to insert effectively in any part of the course.

Unfortunately, students are not the only ones who lack appropriate material. Teachers can scarcely find any reference to the topic of applied phonetics, even in specialized books (Haycraft 1992). Teachers are then left with the frustrating task of watching or listening to non-specialized videos or tapes “in search of the lost weak sound and a motivating context...”

Since they can mispronounce words and still be understood (even though with difficulty), they see no point in making any effort to improve their pronunciation. What they do not seem to realise is that their odd pronunciation, without the help of context, can hinder comprehension. More important,—without an understanding of weak forms, they are not going to recognise the words they hear in conversation.

Summing Up

There are two important problems when teaching phonetics in an (upper) intermediate level. First, the lack of motivating recorded authentic material, and as a consequence of that, the attitude of students, makes students feel ridiculous repeating and pronouncing weak forms after a tape. The effect in the chain of speech of our own language (Spanish, in this case) is totally different. This combination produces students who can write exceptionally accurate phonetic transcriptions, but who, in a practical situation, are unable to pronounce or identify what they have learnt.

Now it is our turn to ask ourselves whether or not this is the result we are expecting and, if not, why. Teachers are then left with the task of producing and asking for material more adequate to our own and our students' real needs. Do we want students to apply their theoretical knowledge to their use of English? If so, we will have to start using our resources in a different way. No one is going to “liberate” students from the “burden” of having to study weak forms or their exceptions. It is exactly here, however, that written texts are basic. However, this task should be carried out only as a follow-up of a more communicative and motivating approach. We need activities that begin with the ears, then with the mouth and only later on use pen and paper.

The Addressing of Phonetics

No doubt there are many possible ways of introducing motivating activities dealing with phonetics. However, I have chosen some bits and pieces of Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber's widely known musical “Cats,” because it is music, and because most of the students are sure to have heard (of) it. They will probably know that the play is still being staged in London, New York, and in other cities. In addition because students may not know that most of the lyrics of the musical are part of a book that T. S. Eliot (1939) wrote as letters for his godchildren, they will engage the attention of the learners.

First you have to choose a particular song from the musical and select the lines that you find interesting. Then make a copy of the song with gaps but without any of the selected lines.

Once in class, tell your bewildered students that they are going to learn phonetics through “Cats.” Open with some warm up activities (10 min.), such as giving them photocopies with drawings of cats and asking them to give a (physical) description. At this point, students will not see the connection between cats and phonetics, so tell them that from then on, you are going to work with other cats who have very rich personalities and are very close to the musical comedy. If you are lucky, most of your students will now catch on and will still be interested to see what happens next. Pool their information about the musical “Cats.”

1. Give them the copy of the song, and let them listen to it at least twice to fill in the gaps. After correcting the exercise, ask them for a brief description of the cat’s personality (10 min).
2. Then tell them to concentrate on the missing lines. Play only that part, and ask your students to write down any word they hear. These words will probably be nouns, adjectives, verbs, or adverbs. Ask why they selected these parts of speech and help them reach the conclusion that it is because those words are content words which are always accented. Suggest making a list with the transcription of those words, paying special attention to unaccented syllables (schwas, U, I) and to the pronunciation of past, plural, and genitive suffixes (15 min).
3. Play the tape again, and list the transcribed weak forms using the same reasoning: They are more difficult to hear because they are usually unaccented, which affects their pronunciation. Explain the behaviour and exceptions of the forms you have come across in the fragment of the song you have chosen. Whenever necessary, reinforce the practise by using any of the available recorded material. This activity may take 15 minutes or more, depending on the complexity of the point you are putting across and on the amount of recorded material you need.

I have written in bold the words that may have an interesting weak form (normal or exceptional). On top of that, all past plural and genitive suffixes should also be considered:

1. Prologue: *Jellicle Songs for Jellicle Cats*.

There’s a man over **there**, **witha** look of surprise as much as to say, well how about that?
Do I actually see with my own very eyes a man who’s not heard of a Jellicle cat?

2. The naming of Cats:

...through a silence **you** feel **you can** cut with a knife, announced **the** cat who **can** now be reborn **and** come back **to a** different Jellicle life.

Because waiting **up there is the** heavy side layer full **of** wonders **a** Jellicle only **will** see.

One could continue in the same way with other selections from the musical: *The Old Gumkie Cat*; *Gus, the Theatre Cat*, etc.

As a follow-up activity, suggest working in pairs, i.e., teams A and B. Each should write a short description (5 lines) of the cat, using the new words. Each team should then read its description

to the other group, but pronouncing only content words. They both should realise that the meaning is passed on simply that way. Later on, they could swap and transcribe each other's texts.

Because the material you are working with is authentic, you will not find a paragraph prepared to cover all your expectations. Thus, you may need many songs to complete a single theoretical point. From my point of view, this is not necessary and, can be very boring for your students. The idea is to use the songs to motivate people when introducing an explanation. After making your students understand and practise what you find in the song, however short it is, you can use books (see bibliography) to complete the explanation. This will also open the door to possible problems of transcription students will find in other songs or texts later on.

Working in this way, you can whet your students' appetites by providing them with up-to-date material that, apart from helping them to transcribe, might encourage them to hear other musical comedies or to read some of Eliot's superb poetry. Besides, they will feel that the texts have a life of their own instead of being created exclusively for the sake of transcription. No doubt, they will feel motivated by understanding new expressions and learning how pronunciation, which highlights certain parts and shadows others, also affects the content of a text.

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